



THE JEWISH INTEREST IN VIETNAM

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Michael Wyschogrod

Few issues have confronted the religious community with as many agonizing and moral dilemmas as the war in Vietnam. In this essay, Professor Wyschogrod sets forth a number of additional factors that the Jewish community should not ignore in determining its position on Vietnam. Professor Wyschogrod, a member of our Editorial Board, teaches philosophy at the City College of the City University of New York.

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Among the oldest jokes told in Jewish circles is the one whose punchline is some variation of the “Is it good for Jews or bad for Jews?” theme. Stanley discovers Livingstone in central Africa, Bannister runs the four-minute mile, and the other side of the moon is photographed for the first time. To all of these revelations, Tevyeh the Milkman, or his American equivalent, responds with the age-old Jewish question — is it good or bad for Jews? We smile at the provincialism, we are amused by the one-sided obsession with concern for the fate of the Jews that these stories reflect and we feel superior because we are cosmopolitan and citizens of the world, concerned with issues that affect all mankind and not just the Jews. We would be more than embarrassed to pass judgment on events, particularly when serious moral questions are involved, with an eye to the Jewish interest. If there is a Jewish interest involved we will lean over backwards to be fair and impartial so that no one can accuse us of special pleading. For many of us, the meaning of our Jewishness is precisely this concern with the suffering of all mankind and for injustice wherever it occurs. To take up the cudgels for Jewish interests seems almost a betrayal of the lofty moral ideals of the prophets and the best in the Jewish tradition. Our cause is justice, not self-interest.

It has been said that there are four branches of Judaism in

this country: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reform Democrats. The attitude I have described certainly applies more directly to the last of these branches than the others. The liberal Jewish intellectual, particularly if his roots are deep in the labor movement or in one or another of the socialist groups, is deeply committed to the cause of Mankind as such. But even those who are not averse to identifying with organizations that devote themselves to the defense of Jewish rights (Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Congress, etc.) suffer from a certain ambivalence. In most cases, these organizations base their defense of Jewish rights on appeals to general humanitarian and liberal principles which, they argue, are threatened whenever Jewish rights are curtailed. They speak of justice, not Jewish interests; it just so happens that their reading of the dictates of justice turns out to coincide with the interests of Jews. The unwritten premise is that this could not be otherwise, that the demands of justice and the interests of Jews always coincide because the Jewish interest is justice and nothing else. Because this is so, to defend Jewish interests is a morally edifying task, worthy of the loyalty of all to whom the cause of justice is dear. There are, of course, those whose appetite for justice becomes ever more refined. They come to crave the pure form of it, just as the Platonic philosopher, once he has obtained the vision of Absolute Beauty, loses interest in the beautiful things of this world with their material admixture and focuses his gaze on the eternal and the unchanging which can only be approximated by beautiful things but never equaled. So the Jewish seeker for justice comes to shy away from causes in which the search for justice might conceivably be tainted with individual or group self-interest. He concentrates on the defense of the rights of groups to which he does not belong. His cause is then pure, whether it be the civil rights movement or the struggle for peace. The Jewish community laments the fact that the loyalty of much of its youth is drawn into those causes which are not specifically Jewish, though at the same time it cannot fail to be proud of the proclivity of Jews for the cause of justice.

The fallacy in all this is that justice and self-interest are

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thought to be antithetical. My argument is that there cannot be a defensible notion of justice without the recognition of a legitimate self-interest. I will argue that there is a Jewish self-interest in the Vietnamese situation which has, up to the present, not been understood clearly by the American Jewish community and that this self-interest ought rightly to influence the attitude of American Jews to that struggle. I will further maintain that it is an act of moral dereliction on the part of American Jews not to keep that interest in mind. Finally, I will maintain that the lack of recognition of the Jewish interest in Vietnam is symptomatic of a malaise in American Jewish life which, if not checked, can seriously threaten Jewish existence.

I

Should smoking be permitted in the classroom? I find it difficult to teach philosophy without puffing on my pipe and several of my students prefer to smoke while concentrating on the points being made. Others in the class are non-smokers and are mildly irritated by the heavy smoke that accumulates in the room at the end of the hour. What is the justice of the case? Inherently, it seems to me, there is no moral principle that dictates what is right in such a situation. There are conflicting interests: the interest of those students who enjoy smoking conflicts with the interest of those who are irritated by the smoke. Justice enters the picture when we attempt to resolve this conflict of interests. One possibility that comes to mind immediately is the ballot. By having a vote, we can weigh the conflicting interests and if we are devoted to some version of the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" principle, we might take the vote as indicative of which course of action would satisfy the greatest number. We are, of course, thereby assuming that the interest of each individual is approximately equal and that by simply comparing the number of votes for a particular solution with the number of votes against it, a reasonable solution emerges. In fact, this assumption may be erroneous. This would be the case if one member of the class were so allergic to smoke that being compelled to submit to a smoky

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room would produce serious discomfort or even illness. In such a case, the interest of that one person would outweigh the contrary interests of all others simply because his major suffering would exceed the smaller pleasures of the others, though they be far greater in number.

The point, however, is that in taking a vote, each person would have to vote from the perspective of his own interest because the general interest emerges only through a process that adds up the different individual interests. Suppose this class were made up exclusively of moral idealists who considered it wicked to approach any problem from the point of view of self-interest. When the time for voting came around, each of the idealists would think only of the interests of the majority. They would all look at each other to determine the wishes of the others but since the others would be doing the same thing, no vote could take place and the problem could not be resolved. The resolution of the problem demands that initially each person approach the question from his own interest. I say "initially," because if each person insists on his own interest to the bitter end, there will be no acceptance of the outcome of the vote. But while it is necessary that after a point self-interest yield to the interest of the majority, it is logically necessary, if we are to determine the interest of the majority, that individuals not relinquish their self-interest too soon.

Now it is true, of course, that not all conflicts of interests are either as trivial as the example cited nor can they all be resolved easily by taking a vote. But it is the case that wherever justice is an issue there are interests involved and that it is not morally degrading for an individual to treat his own interests with some respect, even if at times he be willing to yield his interest to the welfare of others. The reason for this is, as I have already indicated, that the welfare of others comes into question only if these others have interests which they are willing to project and for which they are willing to struggle. The Talmud touches on this question when it discusses the case of two travelers in the desert who have a quantity of water that is sufficient to enable only one of them to reach the oasis. Must they share the water and both perish or may one of them drink

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it and live, though the other perish? The Talmud's answer is simple and straightforward: if the water is jointly owned, neither party may appropriate more than his proper share because to do so would constitute robbery which, in this particular case, would result in the death of the companion. But if the water is owned by one, it is not incumbent upon him to give part of it away if, by so doing, his death will result. If the water is his, he has the right to prefer his interest over that of the other because the alternative is either sharing it, which will result in the death of both, or bestowing the water as a gift on the other. But this is not required because no man need prefer the life of another over his own if he can save his life without stealing from the other. In this case, the interest of the self takes precedence.

This reasoning, it seems to me, also applies to those nearest to me. The fact of the matter is that I do much more for my children than for the children of others. From time to time this troubles me not a little. What right do I have to lavish my income and my love on my children when I know full well that there are other children in the world, not few in number, who are in dire need and whose welfare I could improve by viewing my children as some among many in the world, whom I ought not to treat worse than the others, but also not better? Do I have the moral right to be partial to my children and heap upon them more love and affection than I do on others? My answer is that I do have a greater moral obligation to care for the welfare of my family than for others. I must hasten to add that this does not mean that I have no obligation to care for the welfare of others nor does it mean that I may advance the interests of my welfare at all costs, irrespective of what harm I thereby cause others. There are situations in which it may be incumbent upon me to diminish the welfare of my family even to a considerable degree if by so doing a significantly greater benefit accrues to others. But the disproportion between the harm done to mine and the benefit to the others must be considerable. Otherwise, I have a natural right to prefer the children I love and to labor primarily for their benefit. The reason for this is not only the almost biological affinity of parent for

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child — though that too is not of small significance — but that there is a primacy to the self-interest of the family which is the foundation of human society. It is as if the moral order determined that, by and large, most children will benefit if their parents devoted themselves in the first instance to their welfare. It is after all the parents of a child who usually know best what is good for him. By making each parent responsible for the welfare of his children, we achieve, in the vast majority of cases, the desirable result that children are cared for by those who particularly love them and are therefore generally better suited to care for them than a stranger would be. To put it in other words: while it is my grave duty to care for the welfare of orphans, it is not incumbent upon me to treat my children as if they were orphans when they are not.

Finally, *mutatis mutandis*, the same reasoning applies to one's community and to one's nation. In the Talmud, the first obligation of a community is to feed its own poor, and only then must it be concerned with the welfare of the poor of other communities. While the Senator from Arizona must not be oblivious to the national interest, he may justly place special emphasis on the interests of the state of Arizona and this, not mainly because he is elected there, but because representative democracy presupposes that the particular interests of regions are represented. In approaching any political problem, every government is very conscious of the national interest and acts in consonance with it. This again does not mean that all governments are uninterested in moral issues or in the welfare of the world community. While some may view the national interest as the only relevant consideration, others are occasionally willing to sacrifice some of it on moral grounds, but they are never oblivious to it. They make their decisions aware of the tension that sometimes arises between moral principle and national interest and it is my argument that this is not merely a deplorable fact to be condemned morally but the very dictate of morality itself. The government of a nation represents the people of that nation and it therefore has a duty to lay special emphasis on the welfare of that people just as the Senator from Arizona is especially aware of the interests of his state.

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On the international level, concord among nations comes about not by each ignoring its interests, but by each having a rational view of its interests, accepting the fact that other nations have interests of their own and being willing to work out an arrangement when interests clash such that the interests of all are safeguarded to some extent.

Those of us who consider ourselves part of the entity that is the Jewish people will therefore justifiably approach many of the issues agitating the world with a concern for the Jewish interest at stake in these issues. In the words of Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who is for me? And if I am for myself, what am I, and if not now, when?" Just as it is wrong to be concerned only with oneself, so it is wrong to be completely unconcerned with oneself. Fortunately enough, in the case under discussion it is my conviction that the Jewish interest in the matter coincides with the best interest of all mankind. But let us start with the Jewish interest.

II

What is the Jewish interest in the Vietnamese situation? There are two aspects to this problem, one general, the other more specific. The general aspect concerns Jews and Communism as such and the effects of a Vietcong victory on European stability. The other is more specific in that it revolves around the parallel that must be drawn between the situation of Israel and South Vietnam.

The Jewish experience with Communism is, of course, restricted to European Communism for the simple reason that there are not many Jews in the Far East and therefore we cannot discuss the fate of the Jewish communities of China or North Korea. Furthermore, in view of the profound split between Moscow and Peking, it might even be argued that whatever one can say about Soviet Communism no longer applies to the Oriental variety. Whatever the significance of these considerations may be, it might be best to start out by placing on the record what is incontestable, obvious and universally recognized: that Soviet Communism has been extremely destructive to Jewish existence in its sphere of influence. The three

million Jews of the Soviet Union are now in distinct danger of losing their national, religious and ethnic identity. In a generation that witnessed the physical extermination of six million Jews, such a danger of cultural extermination, while of a different order from the physical extermination of Nazi totalitarianism, is a potential catastrophe that is naturally of the gravest concern to Jews. While it is true that conditions in other European Communist countries, such as Poland and Hungary, are better for Jews, the much larger number of Jews in the Soviet Union makes that the focal problem. From this point of view it is to the interest of the Jewish people that Soviet power not be extended, quite apart from all other legitimate objections one might justifiably have to the totalitarianism of the Soviet variety. In fact, this is largely an academic issue because a certain stabilization has occurred in Europe safeguarding the non-Communist portion of that continent from Communist encroachment. Since the fall of China to Communism and the Korean war, the major area of instability has been the Far East and there, as already noted, there are no major Jewish communities. Nevertheless, it is not at all unreasonable to assume that should Communism score a series of major successes in the Far East, the stability of Europe and even the United States would very likely be affected and to this extent Jewish existence would be placed in jeopardy. This is particularly true in view of the deep Soviet involvement in the Vietnamese war and the inevitable prestige that would accrue to the Soviet Union in case of a Vietcong victory. Whether this would be enough to upset the precarious European balance is hard to say; that it might is a distinct possibility. The whole problem is, of course, complicated by the pluralization of Communism into various forms, some of which are in various ways more virulent than others. To some this means that it no longer makes sense to speak of "Communism" as such because by doing so we obscure the very real differences between the conflicting forms. It is forgotten, however, that Fascism also came in various forms. The Fascism of Hitler was quite different from that of Mussolini, and both differed from Franco's and Horthy's (the Hungarian dictator between the

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wars). Nevertheless, there was such a political reality as Fascism just as there is such a reality as Communism today. All forms of Communism are detrimental to Jewish existence, though of course some more so than others. Jews, therefore, to the extent that they respect their interests as Jews, ought to be aware of the Communist threat to Jewish existence and draw the proper conclusion from that fact.

To understand this properly does not involve overlooking the genuine changes that have occurred in Moscow-style Communism in recent years. These changes have been mostly to the good and to that extent are in the interests of the people living under this style of Communism, the people of the world and the Jews. But the fact remains that of all the changes that have occurred in the Soviet Union, the fate of the Jews has remained more fixed than almost any other feature of Soviet life, a fact which ought legitimately to be reflected in the attitude of Jews towards the Soviet system. It must also be made very clear that Jewish self-interest in no sense dictates dreams of a war of liberation against the Soviet Union. In the nuclear age, no rational person can consider war of an offensive variety as anything but the greatest calamity. But it does mean that the Soviet Union must be taught what in fact she seems to have learned: that borders cannot be changed by force, be it in the guise of national wars of liberation, externally supported guerrilla operations, etc. In Europe, this lesson seems to have sunk in, a fact to which we owe the peace of that continent.

Asian Communism has, however, not yet learned this fact. As a result, there is no peace there. In any direct way, there is little Jewish interest as such in the Far East except to the extent that the interests of the State of Israel are involved. And here we come to the crux of our argument.

Israel is an Asian country. It stands to reason that Asian events will therefore not leave Israel unaffected. But being Asian is only the first of the similarities between Vietnam and Israel. Both are countries that have been split artificially into two components. Both have long borders separating one segment from the other. In both cases nobody likes the split but one side is willing to abide by the *status quo* while the other is not and

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resorts to force to unify the country. In both cases the theme of national liberation is heard: the Arab infiltrators, often of Palestinian origin, who spread death and destruction in Israeli villages, like to think of themselves as liberating their country just as the Vietcong see themselves liberating their country from the American invaders and their local supporters. In both cases the sympathy of the world Communist movement is on one side, while the Western world by and large supports the other. And in both cases, the only hope for peace rests on the aggressors resigning themselves to the existence of borders they do not like and devoting their energies to building the part of the country they control and leaving their neighbor alone.

Should it occur to anyone that the parallel here drawn has escaped the notice of the Arab foes of Israel, the *New York Times* of November 26, 1966, disabuses us of this illusion. Quoting from an interview with Ahmad Shukairy, Chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Times writes:

“Mr. Shukairy, who was interviewed at his headquarters in an elegant villa, said Arab commandos would soon begin an expanded terrorist offensive in Israel modeled partly on the methods of the Vietcong.

“He announced previously that the Liberation Organization had sent men to observe Communist insurgent techniques in Vietnam. Others, he said, are being trained in Communist China.

“Mr. Shukairy declined to say which Arab organizations would be involved in the offensive he predicted or when and where it would begin. But in a speech yesterday he was quoted to the effect that commandos would be sent to the Jordanian-Israeli border.

“In the interview Mr. Shukairy said men of the Liberation Army, which United Nations officials have said has more than 10,000 troops on the Gaza Strip, were receiving shipment of arms from China.

“These arms, he said, include light and automatic weapons, anti-aircraft and anti-tank guns, ammunition, hand grenades, pistols and rifles. He said the weapons were shipped ‘free of charge’ from a Chinese port to an Arab port.”

The parallel between the fate of the Vietcong and the Palestine Liberation Organization is thus very clear to Mr. Shukairy.

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It only remains for it to become clear to the American Jewish community.

All historic parallels have their limits, of course. No two historic situations are exactly alike as no two events or objects in the universe are exactly alike. Thus one can point out that the Jewish population of Israel is united and determined to resist Arab aggression while the population of South Vietnam is much less clearly united. Writing in a recent issue of the *New York Times Magazine*, Robert A. Scalapino, professor of political science at the University of California, Berkeley, estimates that 15 to 20 per cent of the population of South Vietnam supports the National Liberation Front, 35 to 40 per cent opposes it, with the remaining citizens essentially apolitical, prepared to accept the winners. In Israel it is difficult to estimate what percentage of the Arab population supports Mr. Shukhairy — in any case, it is a small percentage of the country's total Arab and Jewish population. But such differences ought not to mislead us. There is no doubt in my mind that a victory for the Vietcong would be of the greatest value to Mr. Shukhairy. It would not only vindicate the strategy of the Vietcong, but it would also make irresistibly attractive the Chinese version of national wars of liberation, a doctrine whose application to the Israeli situation is obvious. And what is perhaps most important, it would demonstrate once and for all the uselessness of American support. If the United States with the magnitude of its military effort on behalf of South Vietnam is defeated, no small nation surrounded by hostile neighbors such as Israel can put any trust in American guarantees. The issue here is simply the credibility of American commitments. Given the fact that Israel can expect no support from the Communist countries, it is of vital significance for its national survival that American support command the respect of its foes. While the Israeli spirit likes to look to itself for its defense, it would be foolhardy in the extreme to overlook the support the Arab cause receives from the Communist world. This support must be balanced by a countervailing support from another major power whose support is not seen as that of a paper tiger. The American commitment to the security of Israel, some of it on the record

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and much of it undoubtedly off the record, must therefore retain its credibility or one of the most crucial factors contributing to the precarious peace of the Middle East will have been destroyed. American repudiation of its commitment to South Vietnam would cast a deep shadow over all of its commitments, a prospect which Israeli diplomats in private conversation view with the profoundest anxiety. This, in short, is the Jewish stake in the events of Vietnam.

There is one other point that must be made with some emphasis. While the security of Israel is a matter of legitimate concern to Jews, it is not the only matter of concern to Jews. If the war in Vietnam were inherently immoral, it would be proper for American Jews to condemn that war whatever the consequences of such a condemnation for the Israeli national interest may be. But such is not the case. Because the Vietnamese situation has been so thoroughly debated so many times from so many different points of view, there is no point in going over that territory here except in regard to the parallel with the Israeli situation. From the moral point of view, it is the question of the reunification of divided states by force that is the issue. Just as the first World War left the problem of reparations in its wake, so the second World War has left the problem of divided countries which have almost all developed into serious international problems. Germany — particularly Berlin — and Korea are two prime examples in this respect. In both these cases it was only after the other side reconciled itself to the realities, i.e., that these situations could not be changed by force, that a precarious peace returned to the respective areas. For the U.S. to brook the spreading of the idea that such lines can be changed by force would have, in my view, the gravest consequences for the world. In view of this it is my conviction that by supporting the U.S. effort in Vietnam the American Jew is supporting a cause that is not only in the interests of Israel and the U.S. but, even more important, of justice itself. It must finally be added that nothing I have said implies that only total victory for the Allies is an acceptable solution to the Vietnamese conflict. The U.S. should be ever ready to negotiate with the enemy and to come to reasonable

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terms, even well short of total victory. It is only withdrawal under conditions of the surrender of South Vietnam to Communist rule, the course recently advocated by the Catholic Journal *Commonweal*, that would be catastrophic to Jewish interests.

III

Why has all this gone so largely unnoticed by the bulk of the American Jewish community? Why did it come as such a shock when in the fall of 1966 the press carried reports about President Johnson's allusions to the Jewish interest in Vietnam? Whatever the exact content or propriety of those remarks may have been, the fact remains, as I have tried to demonstrate, that there is a Jewish interest in Vietnam, even if it would have been preferable for American Jews rather than President Johnson to discover this fact. What prevented this discovery?

It is here that the situation is a bit alarming. It is true that American Jews are not only Jews but they are, by and large, also liberals and that to the extent that liberals have been critical of the U.S. effort in Vietnam, Jews, as liberals, have simply reflected this fact. But while all this is understandable, it also means that large segments of the American Jewish community lack the almost instinctual reflexes that come into play when vital interests of a group are threatened. If such reflexes were missing in this case, it may be because large segments of the American Jewish community no longer identify as Jews on this visceral level. If that is the case, we have something to worry about that extends far beyond any individual issue, be it Vietnam or anything else.

While I find nothing ignoble in any people's will to live, to the believing Jew the Jewish people's will to live is intimately connected with God's will in history and His use of this people, in its biological identity, as the instrument of His plan. While to the believing Jew this gives to the defense of Jewish existence a special, theological significance, the right to existence of the Jewish people and the state of Israel can easily enough be defended on purely humanistic grounds. Whether it be on one

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of these grounds or the other, there is no reason for any Jew to be ashamed of taking Jewish interests into consideration when making up his mind about the issues that agitate our time.